

On The Way Downtown to Show Business, Baby

by Peter Stone Brown

Peter Case and Tom Heyman, are both musicians and singer-songwriters who've been writing and playing music for decades, who happen to coincidentally currently reside in San Francisco. Both make music that is aware of tradition and musical history, and both have been through the ringer of the music business and keep on doing it anyway.

Peter Case's new album *On The Way Downtown* (Omnivore Recordings) consists of two live-in-the-studio sets recorded on the radio show, "FolkScene," broadcast on KPFK in Los Angeles. The first nine tracks recorded in 1998, find Case backed by a small band featuring ace guitarist, Greg Leisz; Andrew Williams, guitar, harmonium, vocals, Tony Marsico, bass; Don Heffington, percussion; and Sandy Chila, drums. They are the perfect backing group for Case, with Leisz' superb slide work happening at exactly the right moment, creating exactly the right mood. On the remaining nine tunes recorded in 2,000, Case is accompanied by David Perales on violin and vocals who is equally sympathetic.

One of the best examples of what this group is capable of happens on "Honey Child," which continually builds and the musicians let the song take them to a different place than when it started, and you start hearing echoes of "Will The Circle Be Unbroken," "I'll Fly Away" and "Lay My Burden Down." This is followed by "Crooked Mile," kicked off by Case's excellent reminiscent of Blind Willie McTell fingerpicking, while Leisz' slide takes the songs to the outer edges.

While Case is clearly influenced by Dylan, the influence never comes off as imitation. Instead he picked up on some of the best lessons Dylan's songwriting has offered, how to write so it's timeless, and how to integrate older songs and styles into a new song, so on one hand it sounds new, and on the other sounds like something you've known all your life. The other thing that makes Case's songs stand out is he doesn't write like a lyricist looking for the clever hook line, he writes like a writer who knows how to make words shine and feelings resonate, so when he describes his town, or an incident at night, or being on the street, you know exactly what he's talking about. "On The Way Downtown" and "Blue Distance" are fine examples of this.

There are two covers, Mississippi John Hurt's "Pay Day" and Charlie Poole's "Leaving Home." There's a tendency among some guitar players when covering a Hurt song, they work so hard on trying to duplicate his guitar

parts perfectly that the song loses all life, coming across as a museum piece. Case sings both songs with spirit intact.

So while this album isn't a brand new groundbreaking collection of new songs, it is an album of real music performed live, where spontaneity reigns and one that you notice more with each listen.

Tom Heyman's last album, *The Cool Blue Feeling* was an album of moody midnight to morning reflections that branched into a variety of styles. His new album, his fourth, *Show Business Baby* (Bohemian Neglect) is straight ahead rock and roll with an emphasis on the roll. There are 11 tightly written original songs built around cool guitar riffs that sound familiar though you can't exactly place them, and two covers, Dion's "Daddy Rollin' (In Your Arms)" and Sonny Curtis' "Baby My Heart."

Working with pretty much the same group of musicians throughout, with a couple of exceptions, Heyman, who also produced the album keeps a unified sound and feel throughout. Heyman is a fantastic guitarist and plays lead that you notice, though sometimes he lets other players handle that chore.

Overall, the album is a bit lighter in tone, though more often than not, Heyman is bitingly and deliciously sarcastic, especially on the title track, which is about working in a bar, "Whiskey Wolf" with a blistering lead by Eric Ambel and "Handshake Deal."

However behind the upbeat tone of the album, many of the songs, despite humorous titles like "Etch a Sketch" are about relationships that aren't necessarily working. Heyman is really great at capturing the onslaught of thoughts that speed through your mind when you're sitting alone in the dark with a drink and a cigarette. That he turned them into rocking, danceable songs that rarely run longer than three minutes is no small achievement.